

Their Eyes Were Watching God

By Zora Neale Hurston

Rationale by Will Canady

Why Is This Text Included in the Curriculum?

The inclusion of diverse texts in any secondary English curriculum helps increase literacy and empathy, carries students through different worlds, and encourages the discussion of sensitive topics to gain deeper understanding.

Target Grade Level & Audience

This semester our class will be reading Zora Neale Hurston's best-known work ***Their Eyes Were Watching God***, first published in September 18, 1937 by American publishing house J.B. Lippincott & Co. The novel tells the story of a young, biracial woman as she recounts her turbulent, spiritual journey through life after returning home and explores a multitude of themes, including love, self-fulfillment, independence, and race. On the surface, ***Their Eyes Were Watching God*** is an ordinary "coming of age" story, but Hurston details the main character's narrative with conscious awareness and vivid, unchecked realism. This book is ideal for mature, high school students in their junior and/or senior years.

Plot Summary

Set in the 1900s Jim Crow South, we're introduced to a young, middle-aged, biracial woman named Janie Crawford, the novel's central character. She has returned to Eatonville, FL after marriages to three very different men, and recounts the story of her life to her friend, Phoeby. We learn of Janie's early upbringing- a young mother who abandoned her, and a grandmother who raised her and wants her married to avoid a fate similar to hers. Janie follows suit, marrying an old farmer named Logan Killicks, a man her grandmother believes will provide her with security, social status, and a life free of enslavement. However, Logan is hardhearted and out of touch, and Janie is a young girl on a quest to find true love. Janie decides to abandon the loveless arrangement for the smooth-talking, go-getter Joe Starks. Joe, or "Jody", seeks power, influence, and control over Janie's life and the small town, whereas Janie wants to be a social butterfly. After 20 years of marriage and living as Joe's "trophy wife", she ultimately rebels against her abusive husband and publicly embarrasses him. Joe succumbs to an ailing kidney, and when he passes and leaves Janie a wealthy woman, she's liberated from her oppressive husband. After two marriages and defeated dreams of finding her true love, she happens upon a young drifter named Tea Cake. Initially hesitant following two matrimonial failures, Janie's relationship with Tea Cake has its atypical ups and downs but she finds her prince after kissing a few frogs. In the end Janie has to make a decision to save herself and lose her true love, then finds herself back home in Eatonville, FL after wrapping up final matters where her and Tea Cake built a home together. The novel is framed in the narration between Janie and Phoeby at the beginning of the novel, and at the end, she achieves her independence, her self-awareness, and her voice with

the help of others. Her journey was one of spirituality and discovery, and by coming home and retelling her past she (and readers) acknowledge she has achieved her own self-fulfillment as a single woman.

Objectives, Teaching Methods, and Assignments

- Examine the use of Southern vernacular and representative culture in the novel.
- Analyze prejudice and racial stereotypes in the past and in the present
- Describe the use of literary devices (symbolism, imagery, etc.) and how they lend significance to the novel.
- Trace the development of the main character from the beginning to the end of the novel; How has her thinking evolved following events in the story? How has her attitude(s) changed? Pinpoint how each marriage contributed to Janie's attainment of self-fulfillment.
- How does this story depict the African-American experience in a positive or negative light?

Theoretical Support/Redeeming Values

During a scene in which Janie and Tea Cake struggle for survival during a natural disaster, Hurston brilliantly breaks down the main idea of the book: in establishing intimate and supporting bonds with other people, one can better cope with the downsides of life. The positive and negative experiences that Janie and Tea Cake (as well as Logan and Jody) share provide her with a fresher perspective on life, which leads to the peak of her recognizing, accepting, and embracing of her own identity.

Literary Qualities & Summary of Reviews

On the value of young adult literature, meeting the literacy and developmental needs are key goals. It is important for young readers to not only see themselves reflected in the pages of novels, but to also have the capacity to read stories sharing the experience of others. The reality is students will encounter people from all walks of life, and it is my responsibility to promote empathy and compassion by choosing novels that will highlight these real experiences. Refraining from racial discrimination by instead focusing on relationships, love, individuality, and independence, in reading ***Their Eyes Were Watching God***, readers can gain an understanding on how life for African-American women living in the early to mid-1900s was potentially like and become aware of how people can overcome realistic personal and social challenges.

Ferguson (2014) applauds Hurston for the book's conception of simple African-Americans being quite creative and beautiful, however, he argues that "emotional scenes are too short to allow readers time to thoroughly empathize with the characters and that the symbolism is pretentious." From self-affirmation and rebellion to relationship equality, Hawkes (2014) points out that "by the end of the novel, Janie's self-appreciation increases as she chooses to defend her life, which suggests that she places a higher value on herself rather than on her relationships."

Handling of Sensitive Subjects/Possible Objections

The era in which the novel was published was extremely critical of the concepts that lead to the book's ban. Many felt that Hurston's interpretation of these ideas was inappropriate and that the book itself was a literary train-wreck. Nonetheless, these concepts have been and will continue to be part of society. It is crucial to sensibly educate mature adolescents on such topics, and students will discuss how these subjects support character development, Hurston's use of language to convey cultural concepts, how sex and abuse is used as a tool of oppression, and how religion and experience compels/contradicts the thoughts and actions of the novel's characters.

- Domestic Abuse/Wife-Beating
- Sexual Imagery
- Strong Sexual Content
- Biblical References
- Racial Prejudice
- Murder
- Vulgar Language

Alternative Texts

I have included three alternative texts for any young scholar and/or parent who objects to the sensitive subject matter in ***Their Eyes Were Watching God***-

Larsen, N. (2011). *Quicksand*. Martino Fine Books.

Through protagonist Helga Crane, mixed-race Larsen addresses how she struggled to identify with both the white and black racial groups to obtain emotional freedom.

Lorde, A. (1982). *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1st ed.). The Crossing Press.

Embracing friendship and romance, Lorde discusses her challenges with African-American Racism and Lesbianism and how she copes with disappointment by finding her true identity.

Naylor, G. (1986). *Linden Hills* (Reprint ed.). Penguin Books.

Naylor's satirical work implies that the American dream is mentally corrupting as it promises nothing but an illusion based on conformity, which leads African-Americans to abandon their values and morale.

References

BOOK- Hurston, Z. N. (1937). *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. US: J.B. Lippincott

Ferguson, O. (2014). Zora Neale Hurston's most famous novel wasn't bad, but it could have been better. *New Republic*. Retrieved October 8, 2017 from:

<https://newrepublic.com/article/116116/zora-neale-hurstons-their-eyes-were-watching-god-wasnt-great>

Hawkes, D.D. (2014). Self-realization in a restricted world: Janie's early discovery in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*, 4(5). 1-11.

Hurston, Z.N. (1998). *Their eyes were watching God*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.